9.2. Teachers and Students of Utopia: Lessons from Serbia

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Abstract

Fifteen years ago, I introduced the MA course "Utopia in English Literature" at the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad, Serbia. The aim of this essay is to present my teaching experience and some of the results, including a collection of students' utopian stories, *Embracing Utopian Horizons*, published by the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad, Serbia in 2014. The application of creative teaching methods encouraging a fruitful interweaving of critical and imaginative thinking resulted in fourteen insightful utopian stories. Education is given prominence in a majority of students' stories. However, the system of education they propose is anything but a conventional one. Recent global developments made me revisit their stories. Hopefully, there are some valuable lessons to be learnt from their utopian visions.

Key words: creative teaching methods, critical thinking, education, utopia

> To the oppressed, and to those who suffer with them and fight at their side.
> PAULO FREIRE (2000: 4)

Can utopia be taught and, consequently, learned? Not just as the history of the genre, but as a form of fruitfully interwoven critical and imaginative thinking that is applicable in the here and now of our lives? Fourteen years ago, when I decided to offer the MA course "Utopia in English Literature" at the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad, Serbia, little did I know what the outcome would be. Admittedly, I had high expectations, concerning both the short- and long-term effects of the course.

It was professor Lyman Tower Sargent who advised me on making the writing of utopias one of the major elements of the course. In 2014, nineteen students took part in the writing project. Later that year, their utopian stories written in English appeared in the collection entitled *Embracing Utopian Horizons*, published by the Digital Library of the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Novi Sad. As I explained in the Introduction to *Embracing Utopian Horizons,*

> Each semester since 2007 … students have been given a similar assignment. Quite expectedly, in the first six years, dystopian stories were prevalent among them. In the 2014 winter term students were told explicitly that they should write a *eutopia,* a piece of writing depicting a good place. … Another equally important aspect of the project was the discussion about the students' utopian stories. Therefore, all the students were asked to send their stories via e-mail both to me and the rest of their colleagues. Upon reading their colleagues' utopias they were to prepare questions for their authors intended for the ensuing debate. … All in all, the obligation to send their stories to the others and be prepared to stand up to their quite provocative questions made them fulfill their task with utmost seriousness and dedication. At the time when they were given the assignment, the students had already become familiar with two definitions of utopia, one by Darko Suvin and the other by Lyman Tower Sargent. Apart from being introduced to the definitions, the students were presented with the long and rich history of proto-utopian forms in various cultures around the world as well as Thomas More's groundbreaking work *Utopia*. (Đergović-Joksimović, 2014a: 5–6)

The publication was generally well received. It earned three positive reviews by esteemed utopian scholars, among whom was Darko Suvin himself. The stories and their authors were then listed in Lyman Tower Sargent's online database, *Utopian Literature in English: An Annotated Bibliography From 1516 to the Present* (Sargent, 2016). Among other things, the collection was presented and discussed in the arts and culture TV show *Vidik* [The Horizon] on Serbian national TV. There were three guests in the studio: one student representative, a literary critic, and myself, who was invited as the editor of the collection. The show can be seen on YouTube, where it has had around one thousand seven hundred views, which is not that bad for such a programme in Serbian, given the average number of views local art shows get (Vrbavac and Nenezić, 2014).

Several months after the publication of students' utopian stories, Dr Bojan Jović, director of the Institute for Literature and Arts in Belgrade, suggested that I should organize a students' translation workshop with an aim to translate one of the earliest science fiction plays, Dragutin J. Ilić's dystopian drama *Posle milijon godina* [*A Million Years After*] (1889) from Serbian into English. Altogether, eight students attending my utopia course and participating in the previous writing project took part in the translation workshop. The result was a joint publication of the translation by the Institute for Literature and Arts and the Faculty of Philosophy in 2016. A scene from the play was then performed in the English translation at the Faculty of Philosophy during the international conference *Encounters of Cultures,* when the book itself was promoted. So, for two years, utopia in its various forms figured somewhat large at the Novi Sad Faculty of Philosophy, which resulted, among other things, in the rise of interest in utopia. Up to that moment, I had supervised four MA theses and one doctoral dissertation exploring utopia, and since then, more than twenty MA theses and doctoral dissertations.

The initial utopian collaboration proved to be fruitful and inspiring indeed. But, what interested me most was the students' feedback. During the 2014 spring term, an anonymous questionnaire was distributed to the nineteen students who wrote the utopian stories:

> The questionnaire contained fifteen questions, thirteen closed-ended and two open-ended ones. The aim of the questionnaire was to gather information concerning their attitude towards utopia in general, but also towards utopia as a literary genre and as a course studied at the Faculty. Additionally, the respondents were asked to express their opinion about a specific assignment of utopia writing. Eighteen students (94.7% of the respondents) found both the course and the writing assignment useful and interesting. Moreover, six of them (31.6 %) asserted that utopia should be studied more and that creative teaching methods such as utopia writing should be applied in other courses as well. (Đergović-Joksimović, 2014b: 531)

Relying predominantly on their own imagination and creativity, my students have successfully completed their cognitive task. Karen A. Franck, who has set a similar task for her architecture students, insists that "it is time that imagining, in Edward Casey's words, 'be granted its own cognitive value, its own specific way of knowing' … and that we use and value it more fully" (Franck, 1998: 139–40).

Interestingly, education is given prominence in a majority of my students' stories (13 out of 14). It is both an element indicative of the utopian state of affairs and/or the precondition for the creation of a particular utopia. The system of education proposed by my students is anything but the traditional, conventional one. Authors of the deep space story "Anixitopia" even claim:

> a thousand years ago precious knowledge was only for the selected few, not everybody could know everything they were interested in because *some* didn't like it. Of course, that fact wasn't public and they had public schools back on Earth in which people actually learned how to be slaves, not people of thought. (Savić & Sakač, 2014: 92)

Quite expectedly, students' utopian societies are knowledge-oriented, while the knowledge itself is free for all, freely shared among all the inhabitants, regardless of their age, race, sex, or gender. Libraries are omnipresent, unlike schools or other educational institutions. Actually, in several stories they are the only institutions explicitly mentioned. In the story "Arcadia", for example, the library is "our only school". The people "study in its park, and then, in the evening, we discuss everything we know with the forest writers and poets. Thus we learn by listening to each other" (Rastoder & Ramović, 2014: 36). Obviously, this is a non-dogmatic, non-hierarchical, and non-coercive education. In all the students' utopias, learning is a constant process leading to the joyful, fulfilled, and peaceful living of all. Passing knowledge to the young ones is one of the most honoured tasks, but education is not reduced to mere rote learning and cramming. From the story "Aipotu" we learn that

> Educators also guided the children through the development of social and interactive skills. They encouraged them to pay attention to other people's needs and interests, to actually care about them, and to have a positive attitude towards other people, other cultures and different environments. This enabled all children to take care of themselves, to be capable of making responsible decisions, to participate productively in society as active citizens, and to take care of each other. (Kokora, 2014 :73)

The educational system of Aipotu is everything that our current educational system is not. The majority of students intuitively understood what John White summarized in the following way: "'What should our society be like?' is a question

which ... overlaps so much with the question about education that the two cannot sensibly be kept apart" (White, 1982: 1). Undoubtedly, we have been haunted by perplexing questions concerning education and society ever since Plato and his *Republic*. Peter Sloat Hoff stresses the mutual underlying interconnectedness of the educational system, its students, and the society we live in:

> It takes a wise and rational society to establish the kind of education system that would sustain and advance a wise and rational society. Conversely, if the society is not wise and rational, how can it create an educational system that would lead to that utopian world? Similarly, if an educational system is not succeeding in promoting reason and wisdom, how can it expect the leaders it graduates will be capable of developing the kind of education system that will produce rational and wise leaders? (Hoff, 2009: 215)

The only way out of this vicious circle, or so it seems, according to Hoff, would be to press the "reset" button (2009: 205). But now, when there is so much talk about a general reset, it would be wise to know who owns the button, who wants to press it, and why, as well as what this type of reset might bring us all.

Some may wonder why I have decided to revisit local Serbian students' utopian dreams and literary achievements from eight years ago. Since then, our world has changed, and for the much, much worse. Civilization is now, as H. G. Wells famously put it, "in a race between education and catastrophe" (Wells, 1920: Vol. 2, 594). And not only have our educational systems and curricula remained the same, but psychological, cognitive, and emotional aspects of the student-teacher relationship are now seriously undermined and jeopardized as they have become computer mediated in the world of estranged virtual education. The busy, noisy, spontaneous flow of ideas freely exchanged in our classrooms in the past is no more. And even that was far from perfect—marred by numerous contradictions, and various degrees of dehumanization, coercion, and authoritarianism. No wonder so many students insisted on a radically different education system in their utopian stories.

All this made me revisit what they wrote in 2014. The majority of them had never heard of Paulo Freire and his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* And yet, intuitively and imaginatively they had grasped the need for a "courageous dialogue" leading to the "solution of the teacher-student contradiction" (Freire, 2000: 128, 72). If we want to make a process of learning a truly two-way street, then we have to do away with the class-like division of the haves and have-nots in our classrooms.

Teachers as possessors of knowledge, students as the dispossessed until proven to the contrary, treated as blank slates — this is the so-called "banking" model of education Paulo Freire talked about:

> In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry. The teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence. The students, alienated like the slave in the Hegelian dialectic, accept their ignorance as justifying the teacher's existence — but, unlike the slave, they never discover that they educate the teacher. (Freire, 2000: 72)

In order to get rid of the market-modelled and market-oriented, highly competitive banking model of education, where only mathematically measurable achievements are taken into account, we also have to free our society from its shackles. As Freire warned us, "it would indeed be naive to expect the oppressor elites to carry out a liberating education" (Freire, 2000: 134). So, what is to be done? To change education as one of the pillars of hegemony we also have to change the society. The claim that both our societies and our education systems are beyond repair may sound preposterous. But, if they were not, we would not end up where we are now: on the shores of a new monstrous Leviathan. Call it what you will—technological and/or corporate neofeudalism, or surveillance capitalism. Whatever the oppressor elites are trying to sell us, we should bear in mind Gajo Petrović's words that "the struggle for a free society is not a struggle for a free society unless through it an ever greater degree of *individual* freedom is created" (Petrović, 1966: 276). And, what about our education system? Alas, as Chomsky once suggested (1996: 75) and as my students wrote, it can only be dismantled in some, hopefully, much more free, just, and humane society; one based on sharing, solidarity, and co-operation, which is supported and inspired by a radically different educational theory or philosophy. This is what I have learned teaching my students. I can only hope that, in the struggle that awaits us all, we shall overcome and be able to embrace their utopian horizons. We are already eight years late.

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